

Return from a dance with danger



PHOTO: Geraint Lewis

Why did our finest dancer vanish for four years? Michael Clark tells Ismene Brown what he found in the wilderness

There is a revealing party game to be played only among the mercifully drunk, where one person goes out of the room and everyone has to guess who's missing.

In the dance world half the room could empty, and one would be unsure of any identifiable loss. But not in one case. When four years ago Michael Clark, his drug habit well out of control, disappeared to northern Scotland, a great hole was left in British modern dance that nothing could fill. "Where's Michael? How's Michael?" you would hear whispered at dance performances.

Such words as "angelic", "Nijinsky", "divine" seemed to tumble out when people talked of him, both as dancer and choreographer, in the Eighties and early Nineties. Outrageousness was never far away, in-your-face sex, irreverence, unexpected costumes, but Clark was dance's poet, as capable of mystifying beauty as of grossness.

For four years the strings were silent, while the young Apollo fought not only his heroin habit but found relief from the cacophony of celebrity. His return to the stage this week, with a new touring work, shows a Michael Clark who is now 36, and has changed a good deal. He has got visibly tougher, stripped himself down to essentials - not least because he's been firmly put in his place by Scots fisherfolk.

"I went up to Scotland, where I come from, it's a fishing village. The idea of being paid to dance was incredible there. One man said, was I a 'Chippenham'? One thing that struck me was that there was no music there at all, except at church. I began to realise up there how lucky I was. I also realised, that's why I left, and had to dance.

"I think the last year has been like a sped-up version of what happened over a number of years in the past - discovering why I wanted to dance, going to class again, learning to dance again, starting to make work again.

"I was pretty isolated in a big city like London, growing up in public, and leading a private life that was quite public. I just wanted to be invisible - just be a normal person. Just really get some distance from this thing that I'd created, called Michael Clark."

This "Michael Clark" was a *monstre sacre* as well as an *enfant terrible* - he and his soulmate, the florid performance artist Leigh Bowery, had managed to make ballet look fusty and current modern dance look over-solemn, but they had also painted themselves into a corner with their idiosyncrasies.

Bowery, a mountainous Australian (painted nude by Lucian Freud), would teeter on platform heels while the elfin, swallow-bodied Clark squiggled a complicated dance-script alongside him, in which classical ballet was always just about readable.

His last two pieces before the break showed this fertile young imagination gripping two ballet masterpieces - Stravinsky's 'The Rite of Spring', Balanchine's 'Apollo' - and transforming them into entirely individual new creations, called 'Mmm' (known also as 'Michael's Modern Masterpiece') and 'O'.

When last seen on stage, in summer 1994, in 'O' at the Brixton Academy, Clark was a white-wrapped baby-man fighting inside a glass cube, apparently desperately attempting to be reborn.

"But with difficulty!" he says. "Yeah, that's about it..."

Knowing now that he was helplessly in the grip of drugs, it's hard not to shiver at the memory of 'O'. Also a little worrying: what if it was his addiction that gave him that feverishly dramatic sense of need?

In one telling moment in the new work, "current/SEE", Clark rolls on the front of the black stage, clutching the edge of it, I suggested, as if the stage were his lover and he were expressing his need for it.

He laughs at that. "No! Well, that's interesting. But I suppose at that point I was just seeing how it feels to be on stage."

And it looks as if the cleaned-up Clark needs the stage just as much as before. He looks heavier - "I got fat, really fat. I kind of enjoyed that, though I hadn't realised quite how far I had gone until I went back into class." But that bum-face is the same, that cleft chin, child's mouth, shaven head - above all, the nappy-pin in his right ear that's been his trademark. He has a surprisingly deep, gentle voice, with a soft Scots accent. He says he is "absolutely" happy to be back.

"current/SEE" begins a nationwide tour in Birmingham this week, after previewing last week in Epsom. Apart from five bass guitars and a set of drums, it focuses the audience on the four dancers without much dressing-up.

"More and more I want dance to speak for itself. I don't want people to have an excuse for not seeing the dance because of the other elements, the costumes or other things. I'd like to put more into the dance itself what people find provocative and stimulating."

And the dance is full of ballet: Clark doing basic exercises anxiously, another man doing a quick fluid phrase with all the sudden, uplifting delight that classical ballet can bring. It pays homage to his training at the Royal Ballet School; with his instinctive sense of balance, his weightless motion and flexible turned-out legs, he has always looked utterly made for ballet.

"It's those moments of grace, those are the moments you kind of live for, when you do transcend yourself," he says. "That's why you get up in the morning."

Happily for those who fear his break might have sent him too far towards fundamentalism, a dinky orange handbag that appears in "current/SEE" should put those fears to rest.

This is a tribute to the late Leigh Bowery. "Yeah, Leigh gave me that handbag. One of his jokes was to come in naked, with a huge erection, with that handbag hanging off it. I'm not sure about the handbag here. Do you think I should get rid of it?" No, Michael, please don't you dare.